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INTENSE, SPECIFIC ROUND-THE-CLOCK MAINTENANCE KEEPS 'WORKHORSES' OF V CORPS TASK FORCE FLYING

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE SPEICHER, Iraq – At first glance, the hangar appears to contain the remnants of Saddam's air force strewn across the floor.


SGT 1ST CLASS CHUCK JOSEPH
Spcs. Jason M. Burdick (standing) and Ray C. Winey, crew chiefs from Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Aviation Regiment of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division inspect a UH-60L Black Hawk helicopter.

Aircraft parts clutter every corner, table and workbench. A helicopter sits in a cleared area in the middle of the work bay, its superstructure up on stands. Its shed skin is stacked around the frame. Pieces of the tail section are piled neatly in the corner. An engine is mounted on a rack.

Upon further investigation, what appears to be chaos actually has a purpose. Mechanics have been methodically rebuilding an $8 million UH-60L Black Hawk helicopter.

The Black Hawk is the Army's workhorse in the air. Here, the 2nd Battalion, 1st Aviation Regiment maintains and flies most of the Black Hawk fleet in Task Force Danger of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division.

The battalion provides general aviation support, including passenger transport, sling load operations and air assault missions. Two flight companies fly eight helicopters each, and a third company is in charge of maintenance.

The battalion is tasked with flying at least 1,000 hours each month, but its pilots have flown an average of 1,300 hours during the first four months of the unit's deployment.

All that flight time adds up to more maintenance, which is the job of Delta Company, 2/1st Aviation. The unit has held the best operational readiness rate for Black Hawks in the Army for the past 10 months, claims Capt. Kevin M. Coyne, Delta Company’s commander.

What makes that an even more impressive statistic is the fact that half of the battalion was deployed to Kosovo last year, and now the entire battalion is serving here. Coyne said his

Soldiers are determined to keep that rating throughout their year-long deployment.

Aircraft readiness is tracked in six-minute intervals, and each aircraft is "on the clock" when it's broken down. Additionally, aircraft are taken out of service for mandatory inspections.

In addition to daily maintenance, the aircraft undergo a more thorough inspection after every 100 flight-hours. At 500-hour intervals, they go through an extreme makeover known as a phase inspection.

“A phase inspection is like stripping down a ’68 Mustang and rebuilding it,” said Warrant Officer Brandon Harwood, a pilot with Bravo Company, 2/1st.

Stripping down the aircraft is exactly what the maintenance company did to the Black Hawk in this hangar bay. Its 2,000-hour phase inspection is 78 percent complete. Coyne said phase inspections normally take 45 to 60 days during peacetime at the unit’s home base. But on the front lines, his team works 24-hour shifts to complete the inspections in 14 days.

Coyne’s unit may do two phase inspections every six months in the rear. Here, they have an aircraft in phase constantly and may have two in the process at the same time. Coyne credits his experienced production control NCOs and warrant officers with that success. The maintenance specialists track aircraft and parts to ensure that all the right pieces come together.

“Being able to get the hard-to-reach part is a large part of our success,” Coyne said.

Many parts come from many different places, and moving them here can be complicated. From their experiences in Germany and deployments to Kosovo and Turkey, the production control people have learned to get parts quickly, Coyne said. The maintenance company gets help for major repairs from the division's 601st Aviation Support Battalion. They are located near the 2/1st and support other aviation elements in the task force.

Another time-consuming part of the maintenance process is documentation. Every job on an aircraft has a paper trail, and every mechanic signs his or her name to each step of the work.

By the time a phase inspection is complete, a 150-page book is created with every step of the work documented, said Spc. Jason M. Burdick, a crew chief assigned to the maintenance company.

“If we removed a nut, it’s in this book,” Burdick said.

Additionally, technical inspectors must give their stamp of approval after examining each nut, screw or part that was touched during the work.

There’s an awfully long paper trail involved with each repair or inspection, but it’s necessary, said Staff Sgt. Nathan C. Bullock, a turbine engine mechanic in Delta Company.

Bullock handles the engine portion of the phase inspections. Both of the aircraft’s 1,300-horsepower engines are removed, disassembled, rebuilt and reinstalled. Occasionally, one has to be replaced, which adds time to the job.

The engine work takes Bullock about 36 hours to complete, and about five of those hours are spent on paperwork.

“If you replace a bolt on a high-speed shaft and don’t do it right, the aircraft will come apart,” Bullock said. “Every time you do maintenance, you have the lives of at least four people in your hands.”

After an inspection or repair is complete, two additional inspections take place. The mechanics, with their supervisors, inspect the aircraft for foreign objects. A

misplaced bolt, screw or tool could become lodged in one of the control mechanisms, which could have catastrophic results.

When the aircraft is cleared, the inspection moves to the mechanic's toolbox. Every tool, including the ratchets, sockets and driver bits, is inventoried, and like the repairs, the results of these inspections are documented.

Given the operational tempo of Task Force Danger, one after another, the phase inspections will go on. Most of the battalion's aircraft will reach 2,000 hours of flight time on this deployment, Coyne said.

"The guys in the hangar are doing such a great job," Coyne said.

"I fly," he added. "I'd fly any aircraft these guys have worked on."